

BODIES, BACK FROM EXILE

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The history of the West has been constructed on a remarkable base, the nearly total absence of a “philosophy of the body.” The acceptance and birth of this philosophy was a very slow (Le Goff and Truong 2003) and complex (Foucault 1978) process that testified to the global distrust felt by the ideology and the religions of the West towards that threatening and corrupting instrument called physicality. During recent decades, however, a new interdisciplinary combination of philosophy, psychoanalysis and neuroscientific studies has witnessed the resurrection of this body. Theodoros Terzopoulos was one of the first practitioners both to introduce this energetic climate on stage and to apply it to the staging of classical texts. His productions introduced a bio-energetic methodology that radically questioned the perennial presuppositions of the “phallogocentric” West and its “metaphysics of presence.”



Klausigelos

Lately, I was struck by scenes of *klausigelos* in the plays of Theodoros Terzopoulos, notably in his *Ajax* (2004) and his *Prometheus* (Athens, Istanbul, Essen, 2010). The combined presence of laughing and crying was an overwhelming, intolerable, chaotic, and provocative experience, staged at the end of an important Greek tragedy, and, in the case of *Ajax*, also in the very beginning of the play. I must confess that the combination of these strong emotions, important as they have been to two of the major Western literary genres, tragedy and comedy, made an interpretation of the plays extremely difficult. What was meant by this expressive use of laughing and crying? Was it just a way to focus on the madness and aggression involved in these tragedies (think of the use of threatening knives, high-heeled red shoes and axes in *Ajax*, and remember the allusions to deportation and the Holocaust in the Essen version of *Prometheus*)? Such scenes delay the action, deactivate the dimensions of time and space, and turn the actors into shamanistic creatures.

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Does tragic life merely become a question of “*Lächerlichkeit*” (ludicrousness)? Or is sarcasm taking over here? Is this the end of tragedy – a Western category that accompanied our culture for more than two thousand five hundred years? And do we finally arrive in a post-tragic landscape?

The excessive and unlimited laughing and crying also suggested that these plays could have ended in many possible ways. They surely affected the Western logocentric composition of the tragedy, the whole text-oriented tradition and destabilized everything I knew about the plays. Looking at Savvas (Stroumpos), Tassos (Dimas), and Meletis (Ilias) (*Ajax*, Archaio Stadio Delphon, 2004; Ludwigshaven, 2005), I saw devils, shamans, possessed beings, spitting and sweating bodies, men brought to the limits of their physical being. At that moment, I realized that I was no longer watching theatre as a representation, but became part of a multileveled energetic and breathing organism that sent signals to the whole of my body and mind. This experience obliged me to leave my “old body” and its traditional habits of watching, analysing, and interpreting, and to be part of a climate of physical, intensive, and vulnerable sensations. It was a short-circuiting that blocked my mind and left me with a disoriented body, shaken as it was by the violence and the energy that were released to the public. This field of energy targeted more directly my body than my mind and overtook me more as a kind of feeling than as a kind of thought. It felt like emptying myself and vibrating in new ways that I could not express with the old vocabulary.

This mixture of thoughts, emotions, and energy will be the main topic of my paper. I will try to understand what happens, when body and energy take over, when no longer the text, but “corporeality” becomes the protagonist on stage (Butler 1993), and, more specifically, what has been the part that Theodoros Terzopoulos played in this change of paradigms. And in a more general way, I will ask what the consequences will be when the traditional Western way of looking at ourselves in theatre is shifting and it is being released (complemented, crossed, annihilated) by other forms of subjectivity and identity, not as an attempt to travel within traditional binary thinking (Apollonian versus Dionysian, patriarchal versus matriarchal, monotheist versus polytheist), but rather to challenge binary thinking itself.

What Kind of Body and Energy?

In the last decades, notions like “physicality” (Artaud 1974), “corporeality” (Butler 1993), “viscerality” (Hirst 1991), “somatografie” (Lyotard 1977; 1980), and a “Body without organs” (Artaud; Deleuze and Guattari 1972), became important issues in a newly developed post-dramatic theory and an open dramaturgical style. Next and opposed to the traditional Aristotelian theory that focused for about two thousand five hundred years on the importance of the plot, the text, and its teleological structure, a new aesthetics promoted the value of the body, avoiding traditional aspects of colonization

by the mind and eluding all signs of cultural inclusion and inscription (Lehmann 1999; Van den Dries et al., *De Verspeelde Werkelijkheid* 2002).

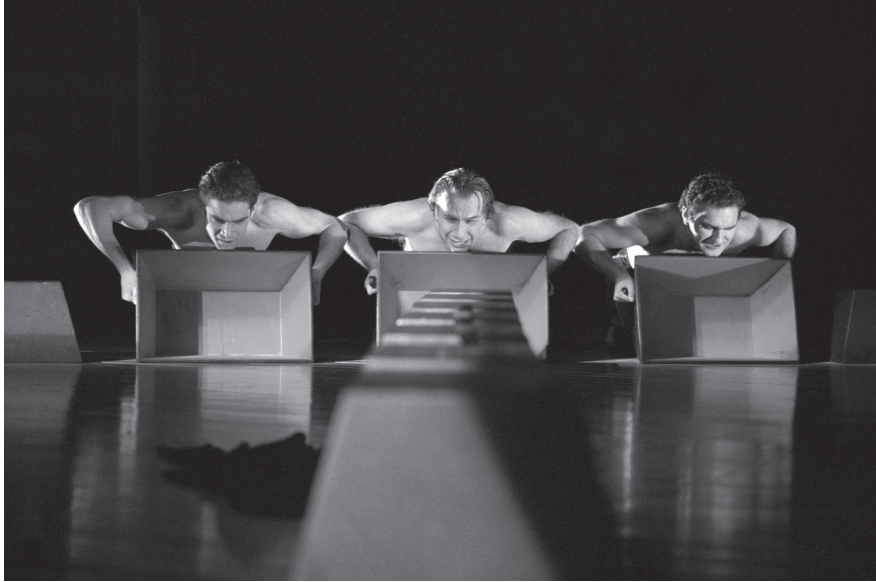
Recently, it became apparent that the West has been characterized by the quasi-total absence of a philosophy of the body. For too long, we have been conditioned to say that we have a body, instead of we are a body (Le Breton 1990). Of course, we had the limping body of an Oedipus, but we dealt with it in a tragic way, that means within the framework of specific Western literary and dramaturgical conventions. We also had the tortured corpse of a male Christ nailed to a wooden cross, but we dealt with it in a religious way, that means within the conventions of a Western religious imagination and symbolism. These bodies functioned as mere signs and symbols within an ideological field and did not disclose any real empathy with the body as such. Both Greek Olympian mythology, Platonic philosophy and ontology, and Judaic-Christian religion, all three male constructions of the mind, are not rooted in the earth and never felt at home in physical bodies, see for instance Irigaray's rewritings of Platos' *Cave* (1974) and *Symposium* (Bluestone 1987; Leonard 1999). All these constructions depended on what Derrida called a "basileo-patro-helio-theological" basic metaphor (Leonard, *Derrida and Antiquity* 49) and on a "White mythology" (Derrida 1971) that governed the imagination of the West and engendered the fragmentation and objectivation of one's own body.

One really had to wait for the ecstatic body of Artaud, the physical athlete of Grotowski, the holy theatre of Peter Brook, the performance culture of the sixties (Fischer-Lichte 2008) to enter into new fields and to discover the importance of a body dynamics. Theatre semiotics got replaced, or was, at least, redeemed, by poststructuralist and performance theories that went wider than representation and studied patterns of energy at work in the interaction between stage and audience. Such analyses focused on elliptic tracks between stage and audience, circuits and contact-zones between heterogeneous participants (Bleeker 2002; 2008). More recently, some interesting discoveries have been done concerning kinesthetic intelligence (Foster 1999), the proprioception, or the positioning and activity of neighbouring parts of the body (Lephart and Fu 2000), muscle and cell memory, the experience of movements stored in our long-term memory, the function of mirror neurons (Rizzolatti et al. 1996), the importance of inner mimicry (Martin 1939; Bleeker 2002), and the working of human energy fields (HEF's rendered by the SQUID magnetometer), most of them being studied in the area of dance and movement therapy, healing therapy, or just therapy (Levy 1988; Serlin 2010). Judith Butler's programmatic book *Bodies that Matter* (1993) exemplifies the importance that from the nineties on, many human scientists accorded to material corporality. And in order to better situate some aspects of Theodoros Terzopoulos' theatre, let me copy Butler's title, create here and now a perspective called "Energy that matters," and return to the working of HEF's (Human Energy Fields).

Surely, a position like this has been a central issue in many post-Artaud-like philosophical and theatrical studies (especially in those of Lyotard; Lehmann; Deleuze-Guattari; Zizek), focusing on the transition “from *logos* to *opsis*” or “from *logos* to landscape” (Lehmann, “From Logos to Landscape” 60), studies based upon the dynamics of performative arts and, often, heavily spiced with Derridean expressions like *espacement*, *déplacement*, and *itération*. Anyway, from the eighties on, a new paradigm radically focused on a theatre without drama (or with a reduced textuality) and gradually turned to the effects of energy both in the bodies of actor and spectators.

Although actual science is capable of detecting magnetic fields associated with physiological activities in and around the body, there are, however, only few attempts to study these energetic processes at work in theatre (see Fischer-Lichte 2006, and her discussion of the embodied versus phenomenal body). Even today, the lessons of all *yoga*, *reiki*, *pilates*, and *chakra* masters still dwell on an exotic and not (completely) accepted and integrated atmosphere. It amazes most people to hear that *yoga* (meaning literally: “connection”) asserts that we do not have one, but several bodies, which are inseparably linked to each other: the physical, the emotional, the mental, and the energetic. We can hardly believe that *reiki*-masters are dealing with the transfer of energy in energy paths (*nadi*'s) and that they are able to cure and redistribute energy both through their own hands and from a distance. Today, we are embarrassed to hear that *chakra*'s, a kind of wheel-like vortices, are believed to exist on the surface of the subtle body of living beings. And how to deal with Chinese medicine, and its system of twelve standard meridians – open channels for the profusion and distribution of energy? The study of fields of energy belongs to what we still consider to be “hidden” forces and, only fifty eight years ago, in 1956, the American government burned six tons of books, journals, and papers belonging to Wilhelm Reich, the founder of biodynamics, because he believed in the existence of a type of energy present in all life forms, primordial cosmic energy, called *prana*, *mana*, or *chi* in non-Western traditions. In his opinion, this energy is not only responsible for the creation of the most tiny particles in our bodies, our cells, but is also present in the whole universe and connects the energy paths of our deepest being to everything present in the universe.

Can some of these systems be useful to better understand what happens during the training of the actors of the Attis Theatre and the performances they bring? From their very first productions, energy was explicitly the main actor on the stage: in *Bacchae* (1986) as part of a generalized atmosphere of ecstasy and exaltation, in *Medeamaterial* (1988) as a burning and destructive force that burns anything it touches (Varopoulou 2000). Even the very last major production, *Prometheus* (Eleusina, Istanbul, and Essen 2010), was resonating on fields of energy that were constantly interacting with one another, functioning on multiple levels and expressing a perennial anger and threat.



*Scene from Attis' production of Ajax (2008), directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos.
Photo: Johanna Weber*

Terzopoulos has always been attracted to the primordial human condition and the basic functioning of our physical and mental categories. Marianne McDonald was very right in suggesting that his theatre “reveals mysteries about ourselves, dangerous mysteries” (2000: 15). He surely met danger in his childhood, when he was struck by the dynamics of the *Anastenaria* he witnessed in his hometown village of Makriyalos in Northern Greece, a “fire-walking ceremony during which people were in ecstasy, possessed, or somehow transformed to the degree that they could walk over live coals without being burned” (McDonald 2006: 12). Equally important was his discovery of a seventeenth-century medical book from Leipzig that described the ancient ritual that patients in the Amphiarcio hospital of Asclepius had to follow, one that instructed them to run for hours and hours, and resulted, after eight hours, in the emergence of an incredible energy (McDonald 2006: 12-13). Since then, he trained his actors in order to “get to the primary sources of energy and ecstasy”: “We improvised for hours trying to activate the body in its entirety, in an effort to get to know its dark and mysterious heritage,” leading them (actors), in the end, to perform the “long journey to the land of Memory. Memory holds the primary language of the human cell,” he mentions (Terzopoulos 2000: 51-2). Agave, in her ecstasy, dwells in spheres that were long forgotten and meets a situation where the performer overthrows reality. “In an ecstasy of reality, the performer’s body finds its way to another, energetically denser and more concentrated reality,” Terzopoulos remarks (2000: 156).

As Savvas Stroumpos, one of the Attis' actors, specifies:

The director insists that the performer has to “bear” the tragic material instead of psychologically interpreting it. In the work of the Attis theatre the laws of the bourgeois theatre are completely eliminated. The actors are not slaves of their poor feelings of everyday life, which derive straight from the cortex of the brain. Instead they strive for the liberating vital energy of the body, considered as the basis of embodying and codifying the tragic material. (231-32)

And he notices:

The actor continuously works through difficult body stances and demanding physical exercises to attain this optimal psycho-physical state where his/her breathing originates from the pelvis. This “descent” to the pelvis through breathing permits the triangle, containing the three basic energy zones (first the anus-base of the spine, second the genital area, third the lower diaphragm) to move autonomously. As a consequence the energy circulates freely throughout the body and the performer experiences a sense of physical freedom and happiness. Optimally, his/her creative imagination is set free and the body is ready to release unknown amounts of energy and produce new codes of expression. (231)

From the eighties on, to be an actor in the Attis Theatre often enough meant the ability to be in command of your centre, starting from your *Muladhara* (the base *chakra*), to be rooted in the earth and to let the force of *kundalini* mount to the *Sahasrar* (the crown *chakra*), or, as the old Hindu texts featured in tantric and yogic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism suggest, to be aware of all the *chakras* in their unremitting journeys through the body. It is perfectly possible to illustrate how Terzopoulos, over the years, developed a great number of exercises that are completely compatible with the Hindu ideas of the *chakras* that concern the circulation and transmission of energy in the body and their distribution along the energy channels or *Nadis*, *Ida*, *Pingala* and *Shushuma*. Getting into contact with your “powerhouse” not only has a tremendous effect upon the actor’s personal well being, but also enhances his link with cosmic energy, the most powerful of all powerhouses. As Wilhelm Reich clearly described, the biophysical energy or *prana* of the human body, the basic component of the human energy field, functions as a key to life and contains the source of energy present in the whole of the universe.

Terzopoulos as a “Black Swan”

Up till now, I have discussed Terzopoulos’ activities within the wide range of two different conceptions of staging theatre, two paradigms, two major visions of the world, and signalled the importance of what looked, at first glance, to be a small detail, the recurrent use of *klausigelos*. Now, I am going



*Aneza Papadopoulou in Prometheus Bound (2011), directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos.
Photo: Johanna Weber*

to bring these two perspectives together, using *klausigelos* as a bridge and a transition, and specify what, in my opinion, the revolutionary importance has been of what Terzopoulos has been doing all of his life.

The first paradigm, theatre as representation, embedded as it is in the world of Aristotelian poetics, was present in his staging of a number of very important tragedies and dramas. This paradigm was, and still is, part of a Western tradition and a way of organizing the most important categories of our thought, emotions, and anxieties. Seen from an anthropological point of view, these tragedies are fictional and mythical attempts to interpret the black hole in our existence, or as Hans Blumenberg puts it, efforts to cope with the fear that the human person as finite “*Mängelwesen*” experiences facing the “*Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit*” (1979). Staging mythical and tragic answers is part of an artistic mission, it is even an existential obligation, one of the necessary instruments we all need in order to survive and give sense to an utterly meaningless cosmic world.

In this paradigm, the actor’s body was a field of cultural and doctrinal inscriptions, colonized by specific representational images. His body was an occupied area that created an imaginary Other on the stage, the character. Energy has never been the main protagonist in this tragic and humanist paradigm, it was only one of the unnamed guests, a visitor who by accident witnessed a (dominant) artistic Form that was culturally recognized and cherished as such. Terzopoulos staged a great number of stories that were

important for the common identity of our culture and helped to give a certain form to Western mythic imagination. As he staged Greek tragedies, he helped to spread the tragic mood, a typical Western flavour and thus helped to create an “ideologically constructed body” (Van den Dries 2002b: 33).

On the other hand, however, he also took part in another paradigm, one that focused on a radical Presence on the stage. Along this perspective, the body of the actor was a breathing organism that no longer needed to be deciphered in its representational task. Instead of standing (as a sign) for something else, this body no longer served the implicit goal of representing a dramatic person or character (Lyotard 1973), but became part of a flux that kept going on, endlessly, turning everyone into a nomadic and cosmic traveller, following endless tracks, no longer in function of a well defined hermetic process that needed to be founded upon one of the many (invented) Master stories, but as an energetic stream of energy that was in a process of continuous transformation. This elusive body was of course the heir of Artaud’s “Body without organs,” and was followed later by a “Theory without Organs” (O’Rourke and Giffney 2009), or even a “Theatre without Organs” (Cull 2009)—withdraws from the desire to possess and colonize. Apparently, our times became allergic to systems that took possession ideologically, became dominant, and aimed at occupation and constraint. In many manifestations of contemporary art and philosophy, the acknowledgement of bodily and mental flux gained in importance. The examples just mentioned of *klausigelos* in Terzopoulos’ *Ajax* and *Prometheus* were concrete cases that functioned like Tommy bars and gateways to other worlds; worlds that temporarily left the dominant tragic model and its organized and colonized bodies, and introduced the fluid body, without destroying the former, but rather experiencing its organism from a different perspective. It reminded me of Darren Aronofsky’s film *The Black Swan* (2010), where the body torture of Nathalie Portman’s Nina signalled the transition between two different ways of looking at life. She experienced an ongoing bodily scratch that forced her to leave behind the sidedness of her feelings and to make room for the unknown black swan.

Terzopoulos’ radicalized *klausigelos* functioned as a bodily scratch and mutilation, one that wounded the old body in order to give birth to a new one, one that mainly operates through breathing, energy, and cosmic connectedness. The breathing organism that he staged from the middle of the eighties on created its own music and rhythm; it activated virtual potentials that were hidden too long, especially, because of the monotheistic Western assumptions that condemned the body, its senses, and unorganized forces of lust. Terzopoulos’ vision on the body opened new dimensions of theatrical play and suggested a great deal of interesting questions—scratches with an unknown destination. Don’t we need something other in the West than the tragic feeling and the kind of tradition it inspired? Does not tragedy with its millennia long heritage cast us in the same old matrix and prevent us from



*Bacchae, one of the earliest and most celebrated productions of Attis (1986).
Directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos. Photo: Johanna Weber*

developing new artistic and religious feelings and paradigms? Is tragedy not one of the stable structures in our Western life and imagination that needs to be questioned in its deepest conditionings? Did not tragedy as a mental category, which organizes our thoughts, fears, and emotions, alienate us from nature and didn't it partially atrophy our senses? Isn't it time, facing the deep spiritual and other crises we go through, to (re)win a fuller body than the one we were raised with, one that is teeming with life, but was so often neglected? Painful questions like these focus more on heterogeneous than on monolithic worlds, more on continuous processes than on definite products, more on worlds in continuous phases of becoming rather than on a situation of perennial being and unmodified Form. Terzopoulos led us to discover aspects of Otherness, other possible bodies, energies, and vibrations. He questioned the traditional ideal of continuous progress and the longing for one dominant ideology, and his recently repeated warnings in *Prometheus*: "The day will come," had a very explicit political colour.

In the end, *klausigelos*, in its revolutionary appeal, provokes the multiplicity and heterogeneity of all things: all possible kinds of systems of control, all hierarchical, stable, and structured entities, both on a material and immaterial plane, perfect incarnations of Form, as we always wanted them to be, can always be challenged by others, since underneath one system, there is always another one, and another one, ... creating lines of flight and a myriad of possibilities to go with. A unique occasion for the old binaries (male/female,

active/passive, god/goddess,...) that constituted for too long our European heritage to revitalize and to reconsider their origin and lineage. Consequently, the art of scratching the old body addresses all senses and calls for a total bodily reevaluation, eventually, even for a new relation with planet earth and new spiritual bonds with the cosmos ...

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